

Conflicts and Global Powers in the Eastern Mediterranean

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The Eastern Mediterranean Energy Bonanza: A Piece in the Regional and Global Geopolitical Puzzle, and the Role of the European Union

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Abstract: This article examines current energy-related disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean. It does so by situating them in the context of the Middle East's broader geopolitical landscape and by showing how global powers' interests and involvement have become contingent on the international and regional political environments. The latter augmented the intensity of the contestation and helped move identifiable and tangible factors, such as Exclusive Economic Zones, into the imaginative realms of geopolitics. They also provided the concerned actors with opportunities to balance out their adversaries and, by implication, diminished their willingness to compromise. Although the global powers' interest in Eastern Mediterranean energy resources is limited, the European Union does have interests in these reserves and related aspects. The fact that the monetisation of these resources is highly dependent on the EU market provides the EU with an immense amount of "buyer power" to stabilise the region and potentially balance the fears of both Greece and Turkey.


Keywords: Eastern Mediterranean, natural gas, maritime borders, Middle East geopolitics, European Union

Introduction

The Eastern part of the Mediterranean, or "The Great Sea", as David Abulafia (2011) calls it, is a heterogeneous and complex geopolitical space. The African, Asian,

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and European continents, civilisations, religions, and trading routes intersect here. It is no wonder that international and regional powers have paid significant attention to this region and vied to impose their geographical and political imaginaries over it. Recent successive discoveries of hydrocarbon resources introduced additional dimensions to the region's geopolitical equation and reinvigorated maritime disputes, which reached a perilous point in the summer of 2020. On the surface, these disputes seem to revolve around overlapping and undelimited Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) where the offshore natural energy resources and transportation routes exist—or could be found. Yet it is misleading to simply attribute the contestation in the Eastern Mediterranean to objectively identifiable variables (such as EEZs, gas quantities, and commercial values) in isolation from the contingencies of the local, regional, and international geopolitical landscape.

Conflicts over natural resources often dovetail with geopolitics (Peters 2004). While positivist International Relations scholars define geopolitics in relation to material geographical variables such as location, natural resources, and power (Harkavy 1982; Waltz 1979), scholars in Critical Studies approach geopolitics from the prism of culture, ideas, and ideology, which performatively results in processes of spatial exclusion and inclusion (Dalby 1990; Said 1994; Tuathail 1996). In this sense, spatial management and mapping are the after-effects of a particular “epistemological experience” that transposes concrete geographic attributes into imaginary abstractions that serve the practical interests of the state (Yves Lacoste 1977, 245, cited in Tuathail 1996, 129). Thus, foreign policy and geopolitics are contingent on the practices and rationalities that reify and make them possible in the first place (Campbell 1998). Drawing on these critical insights situates the geopolitical dynamics of energy resources in the geopolitical experiences, ideas, and ambitions of the involved actors. This understanding provides an instructive analytical lens through which to explore the rationality that underpins the geopolitical concerns that form the basis of the energy-related disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The rich literature on the Eastern Mediterranean's natural hydrocarbon resources provides instructive knowledge to help us understand their economic and political potentials and limitations. However, relatively little attention has been devoted to examining how the Eastern Mediterranean energy-related disputes affect and are affected by the viscidities of the regional and global geopolitical landscape. This article explores linkages between these two levels and systematically situates energy disputes within the broader context of the Middle East's geopolitics. We argue that the prospect of the global powers'—i.e. China's, Russia's, the EU's, and the US's—rivalry over these energy resources is limited. This argument is supported by the following factors: (1) changes in global politics; (2)

the US's energy sufficiency; (3) the US's interest in Eastern Asia and the post-Soviet geopolitical space; and (4) the growing influence of regional powers. The geopolitical experiences and ambitions of the latter have driven and shaped the crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean. The global powers' relationship with local actors has undergone significant changes during the past decade, with long-lasting impacts on the geopolitical and energy-related disputes around the Eastern Mediterranean. The Middle East's ever-dynamic political and security environment, with its regular alliance reshuffles, has intensified uncertainty and further complicates these disputes. This environment has moved identifiable and tangible factors, such as EEZs, into the intangible and imaginative realms of geopolitics and has provided new impetus for the restructuring of alliances.

Greece and Turkey, in particular, have opposing geopolitical ambitions in which energy plays an essential role. Both countries seek to upgrade their status as international energy hubs, and perceive energy as a source to enhance their geopolitical influence within the region and vis-à-vis the EU. Yet their actions and disputes have unfolded as extensions of the post-2011 geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, that is, after the 2011 Arab revolts. For example, new political partnerships (e.g. Cyprus–Greece–Israel and Egypt–Greece–Israel), bilateral EEZ agreements, and exclusions, such as the exclusion of Turkey from the Eastern Mediterranean (EastMed) pipeline project and the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), were grafted onto the Middle East's geopolitical environment. Greece and Turkey exploited the so-called “politics of axes” that has governed the geopolitical context in the Middle East since 2011. At the same time, other regional actors appropriated the Greek–Turkish contestation in an attempt to increase their influence in the region and beyond. In other words, energy-related disputes have been caught up in the Middle East's politics of axes. However, this political structuring seems to be coming to an end. In 2021, regional actors began to realign their foreign and security policies, and it is increasingly unclear, also in the light of Russia's war against Ukraine, what future alliances and partnerships in the region might look like.

This article begins by providing a cursory background on offshore natural gas discoveries, projects, and disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean. The second section examines the political environment in which these occur and demonstrates how offshore energy reserves have been caught in the dynamic geopolitical rivalry, imaginations, and ambitions of regional powers since the Arab revolts in 2011. The third section explores the role of global power rivalry in this crisis with a specific focus on China, Russia, and the US. The fourth section proceeds to discuss the EU's position in this crisis. The fifth section dwells on Greece's and Turkey's competing geopolitical ambitions and projects in which energy plays a central role, and it reveals how both countries have grafted their disputes and actions into the

geopolitical environment of the region. The article concludes by underscoring that although the Eastern Mediterranean energy-related disputes are part of the Middle East's geopolitical puzzle, the EU in particular has a direct interest and a responsibility to stabilise the region.

Eastern Mediterranean Gas Reserves, Projects, and Disputes

In 2000, two small natural gas fields, Gaza Marine and Mari-B, were discovered a few kilometres offshore from the Gaza Strip and Israel. In 2009, the Tamar field (10 trillion cubic feet [tcf]) was located 80 kilometres off the coast of Haifa before a larger (the Leviathan) gas field (17.7 tcf) was found in December 2010 about 50 kilometres southwest of the Tamar field. Two years later, Israel discovered the Karish and Tanin (2.7 tcf) gas fields about 30 kilometres to the northeast of the Tamar field (Offshore Technology 2018). Natural gas was also located in the Republic of Cyprus's EEZ, where the Aphrodite (4.5 tcf) and Calypso 1 (6–8 tcf) gas fields were discovered in 2011 and 2018, respectively. In 2015, Egypt discovered Zohr (30 tcf), the largest gas field in the Mediterranean, and in 2019 the Nour gas field (with an undetermined capacity) (Baconi 2017b; Stanič and Karbuz 2021).

A relatively large amount of natural gas (about 2,400 billion cubic metres [bcm]) was discovered in the Levantine Basin, and indications suggest that additional reserves are still to be explored. However, multifaceted commercial, geopolitical, and technical problems stymied the full exploitation of the gas reserves (Baconi 2017a, 2017b; Stanič and Karbuz 2021). In December 2013, Syria and the Russian company SoyuzNefteGaz signed an agreement for gas exploration in block 2, though no progress has been made due to the Syrian civil war. In 2017, Lebanon announced a bidding round for offshore seismic surveys, and it was agreed that exploration should begin in block 9, which falls within its undisputed EEZ. However, the domestic economic and political crisis in Lebanon and maritime disputes with Israel have reportedly delayed the explorations. On 14 September 2021, Israel contracted the Halliburton Company to conduct drillings in locations that may fall within the disputed maritime area, to which Lebanon protested (Lebanon Officially Mobilised, *Aljazeera*, 19 September 2021). Similarly, the state-owned Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) carried out several seismic surveys and drilling operations in disputed waters between 2019 and 2020, which led to diplomatic tensions between Turkey on the one hand, and Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, and other European countries on the other (Koulouris 2020; Stanič and Karbuz 2021).

These successive natural gas discoveries, drilling activities, and monetisation plans added other dimensions to the regional geopolitical contestation. Offshore drilling and excavation missions intersect with the region's protracted conflicts, such as the Cypriot problem, the Israel–Palestine question, and the conflicts in Libya and Syria, and the maritime disputes between Cyprus and Turkey, Greece and Turkey, as well as Israel and Lebanon. Disputes over EEZs in particular gave rise to a series of contested bilateral maritime deals, partnership agreements, and informal alliances. In addition to drilling and exploration activities in contested waters, the question of the transportation of Eastern Mediterranean gas to the European market has caused far-reaching geopolitical complications.

The East Mediterranean (EastMed) project, a pipeline of approximately 1,900 kilometres, was conceived with the aim of transporting gas reserves from the Leviathan and Aphrodite fields to the European market via Greece and Italy. The EU has shown interest in these resources. The European Commission designated the EastMed a Project of Common Interest (PCI) in the framework of the Southern Gas Corridor project, and the EU as such provided funds from the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) to finance the engineering and design (Front-End-Engineering Design, FEED) study (36.5 million euros) (NS Energy, n.d.), which confirmed the project's technical feasibility and economic viability (European Commission 2019). The EastMed pipeline consists of offshore and onshore segments. The offshore segments pass through the EEZ of the Republic of Cyprus, Greece, and Israel. In 2017, Israel joined Cyprus and Greece and signed a declaration in support of the EastMed. This was followed by several agreements and Memorandums of Understanding between these countries. In 2019, Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Israel founded the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), which became an official international organisation (with headquarters in Cairo) upon the signing of its charter the following year. Later, the EMGF was expanded to include France, Jordan, Italy, and the Palestinian Authority (PA), with the EU, US and the World Bank Group as permanent observers.

However, the transportation of natural gas from the Levantine Basin to the EU market has been complicated by regional geopolitical dynamics and ambitions as both Greece and Turkey seek to control the transportation of these resources. Although the Turkish route is economically viable and technically less complex, it is politically unfeasible in the current geopolitical environment (Baconi 2017b; Stergiou 2019). In addition to the protracted conflict in Cyprus, the post-Arab revolt geopolitical rivalry in the Middle East generated a relative alignment of interests between Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to isolate and curtail Turkey's influence. The EU and the US prefer the Greek route, as is evidenced by their support for the EastMed project. It is worth underlining here that the actors' positions on the Eastern Mediterranean energy issue are contingent

on a broader and fluid political and security context, and therefore are susceptible to abrupt revisions, as is exemplified by US president Joe Biden's administration's decision in January 2022 to withdraw its support for the EastMed project (U.S. Voices Misgivings on EastMed Gas Pipeline, *Reuters*, 11 January 2022).

Turkey opposes the EastMed project and claims that it infringes on its maritime rights and the rights of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) (Erşena and Çelikpalab 2019). Turkey's exclusion from both EastMed and the EMGF came on the heels of stalled accession negotiations with the EU. Following the failed coup in 2016 in Turkey, Ankara's relationship with the EU and the US deteriorated. At the same time, and prior to the outbreak of Russia's war against Ukraine, Turkey restored its relationship with Russia, which had been fractured after the Turkish army downed a Russian fighter jet in November 2015. Both countries have managed to cooperate in Libya and Syria despite their conflicting agendas. This change for the better in the Russia–Turkey relationship impacts on the future of the Turkey–EU energy partnership and projects (Erşena and Çelikpalab 2019), as do energy-related disputes between Cyprus, Greece, and Turkey as regards the strained relations between the EU and Turkey more generally (European Commission 2021).

Egypt, too, finds the EastMed project problematic and incongruent with its geopolitical ambitions. Egypt proposed subsequently changing the pipeline's route so that it would connect the Leviathan gas field with Egypt by land and then proceed through the Greek–Egyptian EEZ to Crete (Athens and Cairo, *Euractiv*, 4 March 2021). Furthermore, Egypt and Israel are considering a similar project that would link the Leviathan field with Egypt's liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals, and then export the liquefied gas by tankers to Europe (Abdallah 2021). In June 2022, and in an attempt to reduce its reliance on Russian energy, the European Commission tapped into this idea and concluded an agreement with Egypt and Israel to import five billion cubic metres of LNG (Nicolás 2022; Samir 2022). This agreement covers about 3% of the total volume (approximately 140 billion cubic metres) of natural gas imported from Russia and less than 1% of the yearly EU consumption of natural gas (IEA 2022).

Pipelines draw “lines” that spatially and ideationally divide and exclude. Not only economic factors, but also political considerations and spatial imaginaries inform the planning of gas pipelines. And this spatial process often has geopolitical meanings and outcomes. In the Eastern Mediterranean, natural gas discoveries, projects, and organisations invigorated disputes about maritime borders, and the concerned countries subsequently resorted to bilateral agreements to protect their rights in the Mediterranean Sea. These agreements produced overlapping maritime borders and EEZs that further intensified the diplomatic and military tensions. Both the EastMed project and the EMGF have geopolitical

implications and their political rationale invoked the same exclusionary patterns that undergird the geopolitical landscape in the region. As Andreas Stergiou (2019, 11) observes, the EMGF is “politically motivated rather than [based on] fact-based estimations, and they overlook certain geo-economic realities”. In fact, most of these relate to the exclusion of Eastern Mediterranean states such as Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey and the inclusion of non-Eastern Mediterranean states such as France, Italy, and even the UAE until its application was blocked by the Palestinian Authority in March 2021. Having briefly mapped the Eastern Mediterranean natural gas projects, stakeholders, and organisations, the following section examines the political environment in which they appear, mainly with a view to improve understanding of the role and interests of regional and international stakeholders.

Geopolitics in the Middle East beyond Global Power Rivalry

From the last century until today, elements of the global powers’ imperial rivalries, ideological and political projects of modernisation and democratisation, and recently the so-called “war on terrorism”, have shaped the geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East in general and the Eastern Mediterranean in particular. As a result, politics in this region lacked clear rules of engagement and, by implication, its geopolitical landscape became chronically volatile (Sadiki 2020). International law, which emerged as the regulatory framework for international disputes after 1945, has been consistently marginalised and violated by global and regional actors operating in the Middle East. What complicates this geopolitical landscape is the multitude of actors and interests involved (Schumacher 2018).

Although these elements continue to play their role, the current decentralised international order, characterised by a reduced US presence, Russia’s aggressive resurgence, and the rise of China and other regional powers, has altered the scope and location of rivalry in international politics. In this context, the US, Russia, and China shifted their focus from the Middle East to other geopolitical regions, such as East Asia and the post-Soviet states (Acharya 2018; Amin 2013; Newman 2020; Stuenkel 2016), which has become all the more discernible since Russia attacked Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

Since World War Two, the US has doggedly pursued a policy to prevent the emergence of forces that would challenge its dominance. This framework guided the proceedings of the Cold War, as it did the “war on terror” from 2001 (Gaddis 1991; Smith 2002). Cheap oil supply from the Middle East shaped the US’s domestic politics and geopolitical interests during this period. Accordingly, the US’s control

of this energy-rich region and its trade roots was pivotal to its global dominance (Khalidi 2004).

While the US has scaled back its commitments in the Middle East in recent years, China and Russia have steadily stepped up their regional footprint and often employed crises as opportunities to oppose and/or create friction with the US. Yet neither China nor Russia has yet the desire or the capability to dominate events in the region as the US did (Bekkevold 2019; Litsas 2019; Singh 2021). Instead, Russia seeks to “establish a constant form of friction with the western world in general and the US in particular” (Litsas 2019, 180). The increasing Russian and Chinese influence coincides with the American downsizing and withdrawal from the Middle East after prolonged and costly interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. China’s and Russia’s engagements in the Middle East have divergent strategic goals, even though they have some common interests and have cooperated to weaken the US’s influence. Unlike Russia, however, China’s engagement is premised on strategic geo-economics and it has a vested interest in maintaining stability (Bekkevold 2019). Although China’s energy demands are growing, the Middle East and the Mediterranean are not China’s preferred arena in which to challenge the US, and both spaces are marginal to China–US relations (Singh 2021). Moreover, Western sanctions against Russia as a reaction to the latter’s aggression against Ukraine have deepened the strategic cooperation between China and Russia, particularly in the field of energy supply (Aizhu and Tan 2022).

The US’s reduced global stature and gradual retreat from the Middle East loosened its grip on the region (Dalay 2021). As a result, major Middle Eastern states began to play a prominent role in shaping the region’s geopolitical settings. Greece and Turkey, the pillars of past US policy in the Mediterranean, have gone through considerable shifts in the last decade. Since 2003, the ascendance of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) in Turkey has marked a turning point in the country’s foreign policy, which has increasingly obtained more independence from the US. Meanwhile, Greece underwent a severe economic crisis that undermined its socio-economic, military, and political structures (Litsas 2019, 2020; Tsardanidis 2019).

In the aftermath of the Arab revolts in 2011, Washington’s traditional Arab allies, such as Egypt and the Gulf states, became highly suspicious of the US’s security commitments in the region (Gause 2011). Moreover, besides the steady downsizing of the American presence in the Middle East, the signing of the Iranian nuclear agreement in 2015, the non-response to the attacks on the Aramco oil processing facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais in Saudi Arabia in 2019, and the disordered retreat from Afghanistan in 2021 called into question the credibility of the US-American security guarantees to its regional allies (Fraihat 2020; Knights 2019).

As a result, regional powers realigned their geopolitical positions and security arrangements (Cherkaoui 2020), placing the centre of gravity within the Middle East itself. Egypt, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE, arguably the region's most powerful states, have boosted their influence and proxy conflicts as other regional powers such as Iraq and Syria descended into internal conflicts and instabilities. Set against these conditions and the security dilemmas they generated, the regional political environment is structured around a so-called “politics of axes”: the Saudi–UAE axis, the Turkey–Qatar axis, and the Iran–Syria axis (Von Maltzahn 2013). And, indeed, this structuring left its imprint on virtually all aspects of political events in the region, including the energy-related disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean. Our analysis now proceeds to locate the energy-related disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean within this regional geopolitical setting.

Eastern Mediterranean Natural Gas in the Regional and Global Geopolitical Contestations

Natural gas discoveries and monetisation plans reinvigorated maritime disputes and created an impetus for building new diplomatic and military partnerships around the Eastern Mediterranean. On closer inspection, however, it becomes manifest that these events were grafted onto existing geopolitical rationalities, imaginations, and conflicts in the region. The changing dynamics between the region's major powers have shaped these events. For example, the warming of relations between Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE was built on their shared interests in constraining ideological rivals—Iran, Turkey, and Islam-oriented political movements among them—and forestalling pro-democracy revolts. In the opposite direction, the conflictual geopolitical ambitions of Turkey on the one hand and Egypt and Israel on the other have strained their relations. Following the military coup in Egypt in 2013, Turkey allied itself with the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar against the Egypt–Saudi–UAE axis, and this heavily strained the relationship between Ankara and Cairo (Bishara 2020; Rahman 2021).

Since the AKP took power in Turkey in 2003, the “ebb and flow” in Israel–Turkey relations has become contingent on events within the region in general and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in particular. In 2008/9, their diplomatic relationship deteriorated when Israel attacked the Gaza Strip while Turkey was mediating peace talks between Israel and Syria. In 2010, relations were severely fractured in the aftermath of the Israeli raid on the *Mavi Marmara* ship that attempted to break the blockade on Gaza and killed 10 Turkish citizens. Although

in 2016 both countries agreed to normalise their relations when Israel was searching for export markets for its natural gas (Baconi 2017a), they faltered at the next Israeli–Palestinian confrontation, for example in Jerusalem and, again, Gaza (Arbell 2017).

Internal contradictions in the Middle East, which placed Turkey in conflictual relationships with most actors in the region, coincided with the EEZ disputes between Greece, the Republic of Cyprus, and Turkey. This geopolitical environment provided a pertinent opportunity for Greece to seek a common cause with the anti-Turkish political axis (more on this in the following section).

In early 2021, however, the factors that had governed the geopolitical environment of the Middle East during the last decade started to subside. Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood diminished. The reconciliation agreement between members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—at the Al-Ula Summit in January 2021 dismantled another pillar of the post-2011 politics of axes (Khalid 2021). In the summer of 2021, Turkey took an initiative towards Israel (Lis 2021) and, in May 2022, the two countries officially agreed to open a “new chapter” in their relations (Israel's Foreign Minister, *Aljazeera English*, 25 May 2022). Egypt and Turkey, too, have been negotiating their differences, especially concerning the EastMed energy-related disputes and maritime borders, and are seeking ways to normalise their relations (Sami 2021).

In this context, energy politics has to bridge two considerations. First, hydrocarbon energy is vital for the global economy and continues to influence the geopolitical connections between the region and major global powers. Second, changes in energy distribution and the ambition to move towards renewables have an important impact on energy and international politics. While Russia is a major energy exporter, the US, the world's largest economy, has become energy self-sufficient due to the evolution in the shale gas industry (Kaplan 2014). China has growing energy needs, and consequently energy cooperation is central to Sino–Arab relations (The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2016). However, China's dependency on energy from the Middle East is declining as a result of the China–Russia energy relations, which have been deepened further in 2022 following Western sanctions on Russia after the latter's attack on Ukraine, as well as imports from West Africa and South America (Singh 2021). The Mediterranean natural gas reserves present marginal (if any) benefits to China's market. Gas projects are particularly limited in scope because of economic and geographical factors. Set against the energy profiles and needs of the global powers, the Eastern Mediterranean as an energy source has a diminished significance for China, Russia, and the US.

The EU and the EastMed Energy-Related Disputes

Europe is perhaps the most suitable international market for Eastern Mediterranean gas because of its geographical proximity. Natural gas dovetails with the EU's energy strategy, which considers natural gas a cleaner energy source and seeks to diversify EU supplies and routes (European Commission 2014; Stergiou 2019). Yet despite lack of economic competitiveness, the EU has shown interest in these resources. For example, it considered the EastMed project an essential element of the Southern Gas Corridor and stepped up its representation in the EMGF, underscoring its interest and desire to balance out non-European actors. The fact that the monetisation of these resources is dependent on the European market provides the EU with an immense amount of power to influence the energy-related crises and disputes. As such, the EU can use its "buyer power" to either mitigate or inflate the fears of Greece and Turkey as well as other actors.

It is vital to look beyond the framework of energy proper because "energy security is not about energy" but "about everything around" it (Hochstein 2016). In particular, the Eastern Mediterranean energy crisis has put the regional security structures and partners (e.g. Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, and Turkey) that served US interests in particular and Europe in general under stress (El-Katiri and El-Katiri 2014; Inbar 2014; Karbuz 2018). The crisis is invoked as an opportunity to boost the EU's so-called "strategic autonomy", meaning that the EU should take assertive defence steps and reduce its security dependency on the US (Grigoriadis 2021). In September 2021, Greece and France signed a defence deal that involves arm sales to Greece (frigates and fighter jets) and mutual defence assistance in case one of the parties comes under an "armed attack" or infringement on its "territorial integrity" (Ellis 2021).

French president Emmanuel Macron (2021) construed the deal as contributing to "European security, to the strengthening of Europe's strategic autonomy and sovereignty". It is inconsistent to treat disputes over undelimited EEZs, which confer only limited sovereign rights, between an EU member state (Greece) and an official candidate country (Turkey) as a threat or even a test to European autonomy. Such an approach can be interpreted in a variety of ways: as a deterrence strategy and a trigger for a security dilemma as well as an arms race that could further Turkish–Russian defence cooperation and arms sales at a time when the EU is trying to isolate Russia. The escalation of these disputes would trigger further instability in the Eastern Mediterranean and put EU and NATO member states (Cyprus, Greece, and France) on a collision course with Turkey, a prospect that conflicts with the EU's strategic interest (Michel 2020).

In the wake of the war against Ukraine, alternative energy resources in the Mediterranean may provide marginal relief for the EU's efforts to reduce its dependency on Russian energy supplies (European Commission 2022). However, this comes with economic, political, and security dilemmas and risks. First, these reserves are economically uncompetitive and would only cover a small portion (about 4%) of the EU's overall energy needs (Baconi 2017b; Stergiou 2019). Following the Russian war against Ukraine, reducing its dependence on Russian energy has become a primary EU goal. But natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean amount to approximately 1.2% (2.3 trillion cubic metres [tcm]) of global proven reserves (198.9 tcm), the majority of which are located in Russia (38 tcm), Iran (32 tcm), and Qatar (25 tcm). Even without taking into account the fact that a great quantity of this natural gas will be consumed locally, these resources would cover EU gas needs (470 bcm) for about 4.9 years (Stratakis and Pelagidis 2020, 14). Second, further escalation may draw the EU into the complex geopolitical contestation within the Middle East, which has become a cause of further instability and insecurity not only in the EU's so-called "southern neighbourhood" (i.e. sphere of influence), but also within the EU itself.

Third, the reliability of a steady energy supply from the Levantine Basin is questionable. Energy supplies from this source are contingent on the political and security situation in the Middle East. It stands to reason to argue that the Israel–Palestine and Israel–Lebanon conflicts and the political situation in Egypt in particular suggest that natural gas installations and pipelines could be potential targets during military confrontations or internal instabilities. In 2018, the Lebanese Hezbollah party declared its capability to target offshore Israeli gas platforms and render them inoperable in any potential confrontation with Israel (Barrington and Francis 2018), and in early June 2022 Lebanese president Michel Aoun issued an explicit warning against any Israeli activity in disputed waters (Lebanon Warns, *Aljazeera*, 5 June 2022). In the May 2021 confrontation between Israel and Palestine, Hamas targeted Israeli gas facilities with drones and rockets, including the Eilat–Ashkelon pipeline and other gas installations, which led to the closure of the platform in the Tamar field (Chevron Shuts Tamar Offshore Gas Platform, *Times of Israel*, 12 May 2021). These events demonstrate the acute vulnerability of the region's energy projects and the uncertainty of energy supply. They also highlight the significance of militarised non-state actors in Eastern Mediterranean energy politics.

In sum, although the EU is dependent on external energy supplies and would benefit from additional sources from the Mediterranean, there are formidable economic and security risks. In view of the above discussion, it stands to reason to argue that none of the global powers have interests in energy-related disputes in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, the above analysis underscores the significant

role played by the region's powerful states and militarised actors in constituting the geopolitical environment that governs the Eastern Mediterranean energy disputes in general and the Greek–Turkish energy rivalry in particular, as examined in the following section.

Greek and Turkish Competing Energy Geopolitics

The entangled Greek–Turkish historical and geopolitical ambitions around the Mediterranean are central factors that shape their contemporary relations. Disputes over EEZs and the Cyprus problem in particular have been constant sources of tension between the two countries for decades (Aydin and Ifantis 2004). Hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean dovetail with both countries' geopolitical ambitions, and therefore provide another dimension to their antagonistic relationship (Dalay 2021). Maritime borders in the Eastern Mediterranean are generally undermined and highly contested, and this makes offshore energy exploration and transportation projects contentious issues between Turkey on the one hand and Greece and the Republic of Cyprus on the other. Energy resources (natural gas in particular) intersect with Greece's and Turkey's geopolitical imaginations and ambitions. They perceive energy as a strategic asset that increases their external political leverage.

Turkey has a strategic geographical position and a network of energy pipelines. It is a natural link between Europe and Asia and is surrounded by energy-rich states such as Azerbaijan, Iran, Iraq, Russia, and Turkmenistan (Austvik and Rzayeva 2017). In June 2021, the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced the discovery of large volumes (540 bcm) of natural gas in Turkey's EEZ in the Black Sea (Gumrukcu 2021). Even before natural gas was discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey considered the integration of a large portion of the Sea into its EEZ as a strategic priority and a central element of the Blue Homeland (*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine, launched in 2006. This imagination became vital for the transformation of Turkey from a transit country to an international energy hub (Austvik and Rzayeva 2017; İşeri and Bartan 2019).

Geography has an enduring imprint on Greece's foreign policy too. Greece is situated between energy-rich (the Middle East) and energy-consuming (EU) regions. Moreover, it is a stable country in a "triangle" of instability between Libya, Syria, and Ukraine (Tsardanidis 2019, 78). Although Greece has no significant energy resources of its own, Greek policymakers almost unanimously consider energy as vital for the country's geopolitical role and economic growth. Like Turkey, Greece aspires to become an international energy hub, and natural gas plays a central role in its energy policy. The country has an elaborate gas

infrastructure (including LNG terminals and gas storage) and diversified gas supplies through pipelines from Russia (via Bulgaria) and Azerbaijan (via Turkey) and LNG from Algeria and Qatar. From this perspective, the EastMed project would vastly improve Greece's energy profile and further entrench its natural gas infrastructure and supplies.

Offshore natural gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean activated the geopolitical competition in a way that infringed on Greece's and Turkey's purported EEZs and maritime rights. It also reinvigorated the Cypriot problem. Turkey opposes the EastMed pipeline and claims that it overlaps with its EEZ. More importantly, the EastMed route competes with Turkey's ambition to become an energy hub and provides its rivals in the region (e.g. Cyprus, Greece, Egypt, and Israel) with strategic economic and political assets. Turkey's diplomatic (e.g. signing an EEZ deal with Libya) or military (e.g. blocking excavations in certain blocks) practices in the Mediterranean have focused mainly on obstructing natural gas projects that challenge its ambitions and interests.

In this regard, the degree of access to and rights in the Mediterranean directly affects Greece's and Turkey's energy policy and the supposed political payback. Claims over EEZs in this context became fervently contested. EEZs confer certain sovereign rights on the coastal state, which include the right to exploit and manage offshore natural resources within the range of 200 nautical miles from the territorial sea (12 nautical miles), as stipulated in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 1982). EEZ delimitation can be a politically and procedurally complex issue, especially when coastal states share a narrow sea with islands and isles, as in the case of the Eastern Mediterranean. The multiple standards that guide the delimitation practices further complicate the process. For example, the equidistance standard would benefit Greece and drastically reduce Turkey's maritime rights. Therefore, the latter advocates for the equity and proportionality principles, which would enable Turkey to acquire an EEZ proportional to the length of its coastline and its landmass. Moreover, Turkey's proclaimed EEZ rights in the Mediterranean are premised on the assumption that islands do not have EEZ rights.

Although the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) provides guidelines to resolve maritime borders, it lacks enforcement measures. EEZ delimitation relies on unilateral national legislation or bilateral agreements between the concerned states (Koulouris 2020). The fact that Israel, Syria, and Turkey are not parties to the UNCLOS reduces its normative and legal force as a basis for resolving maritime disputes. The Cyprus problem and the *de facto* division of the country raise additional difficulties in regard to maritime issues between the Republic of Cyprus and the unrecognised Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and Turkey (Koulouris 2020). And, indeed, the absence of clear

rules of engagement in line with international law is a chronic problem that plagues most conflicts in the Middle East.

Given the complexities mentioned above, Eastern Mediterranean countries have either kept their EEZs undelimited or sought partial delimitation as a means to avoid political and economic consequences (e.g. restrictions on fishing rights) (Stocker 2012). However, the discovery of natural energy resources provided incentives for these countries to look for opportunities to delimit their EEZs. Currently, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Lebanon, the Republic of Cyprus, the unrecognised TRNC, and Turkey are involved in contested bilateral EEZ agreements.

In the early 2000s, the Republic of Cyprus initiated bilateral talks with Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria in an attempt to demarcate its EEZ border. It signed two agreements with Egypt (Agreement 2003) and Lebanon in 2003 and 2007, respectively. Turkey opposed these agreements and contested the right of the Republic of Cyprus to “unilaterally” determine its maritime borders in the absence of the TRNC. As a result, no agreement was reached with Syria, and Lebanon’s parliament did not ratify the maritime deal with Cyprus (Khadduri 2012; Stocker 2012). In December 2010, Cyprus and Israel signed an EEZ delimitation agreement, to which Turkey responded by signing a continental shelf agreement with the TRNC (Erşena and Çelikpalab 2019; Stanič and Karbuz 2021).

In 2019, Turkey and Libya (represented by the UN-recognised Government of National Accords (GNA)) signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the delimitation of their EEZs (Libya–Turkey Maritime Agreement 2019). The agreement reflects Turkey’s interpretation of its maritime rights and, by implication, extends its EEZ beyond major Greek islands such as Crete and Rhodes, not to mention the small Kastellorizo island that lies about two kilometres off Turkey’s southern coast. In response, Egypt and Greece signed a maritime deal that partially defined their EEZs. Although the Egypt–Greece agreement overlaps with the Libya–Turkey deal, this overlap is temporary. The former agreement upholds the possibility to adjust the border coordinates towards the east and west (i.e. towards Libya) in case of future EEZ delimitations with neighbouring countries (Egypt–Greece Maritime Agreement 2020, article 1/d). This flexibility allows for a future Egyptian–Turkish rapprochement and maritime agreement.

The Libyan–Turkish and Egyptian–Greek EEZ agreements triggered a series of responses and counter-responses between Greece and Turkey. The latter resumed its seismic explorations in the disputed waters, which Greece attempted to hinder by sending a naval flotilla to the exploration site. Turkey responded by sending a flotilla of its own. On 9 August 2020, this show of force reached a perilous point when Greek and Turkish warships collided in the Eastern Mediterranean. The EU expressed its support for Greece, yet this display of solidarity lacked coherence. Whereas France supported Cyprus and Greece and deployed fighter jets and

warships to the area (France Sends Jets and Ships, *BBC*, 13 August 2020), Germany adopted an ambiguous position and sponsored dialogue that led to the de-escalation of the crisis (Adar and Toygür 2020; Papadimas and Gumrukcu 2020).

Greece and Turkey skilfully utilised the so-called “politics of axes” in the Middle East in their favour. Greece’s active foreign policy helped it to make a “comeback” in the Mediterranean by building closer partnerships with Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE (Gorvett 2021; Voskopoulos 2017). The joint EastMed project brought Cyprus, Greece, and Israel considerably closer as regards cooperation, and the political partnership between Egypt and Greece evolved after the military coup in Egypt in 2013. As a result, Greece became involved in trilateral partnerships in the Mediterranean (Cyprus–Greece–Israel and Egypt–Greece–Israel) and the EMGF and signed EEZs with Egypt. These partnerships rest on the assumption that disputes between Turkey and Israel on the one hand and Turkey and Egypt on the other are strategic and irreparable (Roussos 2017, 108). In 2020, Greece and the UAE declared the conclusion of a direct “strategic partnership”, foreseeing cooperation in several fields, including military and defence cooperation (The UAE and Greece, *Sky News Arabia*, 18 November 2020), signalling their desire to transcend the EU–GCC framework. It provided the UAE with a position in the geopolitical space of the Eastern Mediterranean. In fact, in September 2021, the UAE state-owned Mubadala Petroleum bought a 22% stake in the Israeli company Delek Drilling in the Tamar gas field (Israel’s Delek Finalises Sale, *Reuters*, 2 September 2021). In turn, Greece has consequently become implicated in geopolitical rivalry and proxy conflicts in the Middle East. In this context, for example, Greece supported general Khalifa Haftar (backed by Egypt, the UAE, and France) and cut its relations with the UN-recognised GNA of Libya. Greece also followed in the footsteps of the UAE by restoring its relations with the Syrian regime (UAE, Greece Discuss Strengthening Military Cooperation, *Middle East Monitor*, 26 June 2020).

For Greece, the energy-related infrastructure (EastMed project), political institutions (EMGF), and partnerships with Middle Eastern regional powers are considered of “top geopolitical importance” for two reasons (Tsardanidis 2019, 81; Hochstein 2016). First, they intersect with Greece’s energy politics and ambitions to establish itself as an energy hub. Second, and more importantly, partnerships outside the EU help reinvigorate Greece’s geostrategic relevance (which diminished as a result of the economic crisis) not only for the energy sector, but also for stability and security purposes. From Greece’s perspective, a partnership with Middle Eastern powers constitutes an added value that could facilitate and promote its political influence within EU circles (Voskopoulos 2017) and likewise its leverage vis-à-vis Turkey. Meanwhile, critical scholars consider this emphasis on energy as “unrealistic—even delusional at times” (Tsafos 2017, 141). While Greece

presents the EastMed pipeline as a strategic project, its economic and political advantages are overstated: the payback is exaggerated and ignores the fact that transit states usually acquire some economic rents (transit fees and services) but no political influence (Stergiou 2019).

Turkey, too, exploited the conflict in Libya to gain further leverage in the Eastern Mediterranean. It struck a military and maritime agreement with the officially recognised GNA in Libya, and Turkey's military presence in Libya provides Ankara with political leverage that may be used as a bargaining chip in Egyptian–Turkish reconciliation talks (Sami 2021). Turkey often leverages the Cyprus problem in its favour and recently took steps to alter the status quo in the TRNC. In October 2020, it announced its plans to partially reopen the Varosha (Maraş) coastline (a military zone since 1974), which in fact was opened to civilians a month later by the Northern Cyprus authorities. The TRNC authorities further extended the opening of Varosha in July 2021 during president Erdoğan's visit to commemorate the 47th anniversary of the military intervention in Cyprus. He reiterated his 2014 call for a two-state solution in Cyprus that would transform the TRNC into an internationally recognised independent state. This would enable Turkey to delimit its EEZ directly with the TRNC without third-party intervention (Turkey says Cyprus Town of Varosha to Reopen, *Aljazeera*, 20 July 2021).

The ever-dynamic Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape often brings political alliances within the region into abrupt revision: the post-2011 “politics of axes” has recently been undergoing perceptible changes. As mentioned earlier, Egypt and Turkey have shown clear interest in reconciling their strained relations. The two countries entered into diplomatic talks in early 2021, which mainly focused on EEZ demarcation, Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbon reserves, and the possibility of Turkey joining the EMGF and the Egyptian–Israeli project to export liquefied natural gas to Europe. The Egyptian and Israeli energy ministers agreed to build a pipeline to connect the Leviathan gas field with Egypt's LNG terminals (Israel to Link Leviathan Gas Field to Egypt's Liquefied Gas Plants, *Haaretz*, 21 February 2021). Cyprus and Greece oppose any Egyptian–Turkish EEZ delimitation deal without their participation, a condition that, likewise, is rejected by Turkey (The Detail of the Egyptian–Turkish Negotiations, *The New Arab*, 12 May 2021).

Greece and Turkey are on high alert, and anything that may touch on offshore natural energy and maritime rights triggers immediate reactions. In February 2021, Egypt announced a bidding round for seismic explorations in the Mediterranean (nine blocks). The map corresponded to Ankara's self-proclaimed continental shelf and was therefore positively viewed in Turkey (Akar Welcomes Egypt's Respect, *Daily Sabah*, 6 March 2021; Schlumberger 2021). Egypt altered the maps and reduced the size of block EGY-MED-W18 (in keeping with its maritime agreement with Greece) in response to Greece's request (The Details of Egypt's Amendment,

Asharq, 12 March 2021). However, this did not impact Ankara's desire for cooperation with Egypt, as Turkey seeks to embed its self-perceived rights (entirely or partially) in a maritime deal with Egypt. In practice, this would further Turkey's relative geopolitical power in the field of energy and its ambitions to become an energy hub. While this outcome may be unfavourable for Egypt, it is crucial to highlight that Egypt relies mainly on LNG exports. Therefore, adding additional political barriers that may hinder the EastMed project would boost the viability of the Egyptian route (connecting the Leviathan gas field with Egypt's LNG terminals). Furthermore, Egyptian–Turkish cooperation could also shelve the economically viable Israeli–Turkish route. The achievement of either goal grants Turkey qualitative advantages. First, a maritime agreement with Egypt would improve Turkey's position and legitimise the extension of its EEZ further into the Mediterranean. Second, blocking the EastMed project would impair Greece's competing geopolitical ambitions and quest to become an energy hub.

Conclusion

Recent discoveries and monetisation of natural gas reserves have renewed maritime border disputes among several Eastern Mediterranean states. In 2020, political tensions between Greece and Turkey became acute to the point of military confrontation. While these disputes hinge on contested EEZs, they are entangled with geopolitical and regional conflicts. From this perspective, they compose one piece in the larger geopolitical puzzle of the Middle East. It is essential, therefore, to look contextually at these energy-related disputes from the prism of Middle East geopolitics, which brings the international and regional dimensions as well as global power politics into play.

Changes in the international environment created new opportunities for powerful states in the Middle East to dominate the dynamic geopolitics of the region. Following the Arab revolts in 2011, the Middle East's political environment was shaped by ad-hoc alliances between various regional powers. During this period, more volumes of natural gas were discovered and monetised, adding another issue of contestation that dovetailed with the region's existing conflicts and internal geopolitical rivalries. As a result, energy, which is usually considered an issue of low politics, was caught up in high politics.

In particular, Greece's and Turkey's geopolitical ambitions and energy politics collided. Both countries exploited the political environment in the Middle East to their benefit. Whereas Greece embraced the anti-Turkey axis, Turkey utilised both the Cyprus problem and the Libyan conflict to buttress its position in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Middle East's political conditions provided the two countries

with opportunities to embed their bilateral disputes into the broader context of the region's political landscape. At the same time, other powerful local actors employed the Greek–Turkish disputes in the so-called politics of axes and conflicts in the region. From this perspective, the crisis and energy-related contestations did not transcend existing geopolitical calculations in the region.

In 2021, the political environment in the region aligned in a way that brought Turkey closer to Egypt, Israel, and the Gulf states. It also enabled the resolution of the GCC crisis, Iranian–Saudi talks, and the rapprochement between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. In January 2022, the US administration expressed its reservations about the EastMed pipeline project. These changes are important because they reshape the ad-hoc alliances, regional conditions, and geopolitical exclusions in which the Eastern Mediterranean crisis played out. Although global power rivalry over energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean is limited in scope and severity, the EU is a significant global actor in this context. The fact that the monetisation of these resources is highly dependent on the European market provides the EU with an immense amount of power to influence the crisis. In view of the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine and the EU's revised approach towards energy supplies, Eastern Mediterranean natural gas may offer relief and compensate for energy shortages on the European market. However, given the considerable energy needs of this market and the available facts, this source offers only a marginal, short-term benefit, and it comes with significant security and normative risks (Badarin 2019). The discovered and exploited quantities of natural gas in the Levantine Basin are not just expensive and small, but also entangled with the various conflicts in the region, which render a steady supply highly unreliable.

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